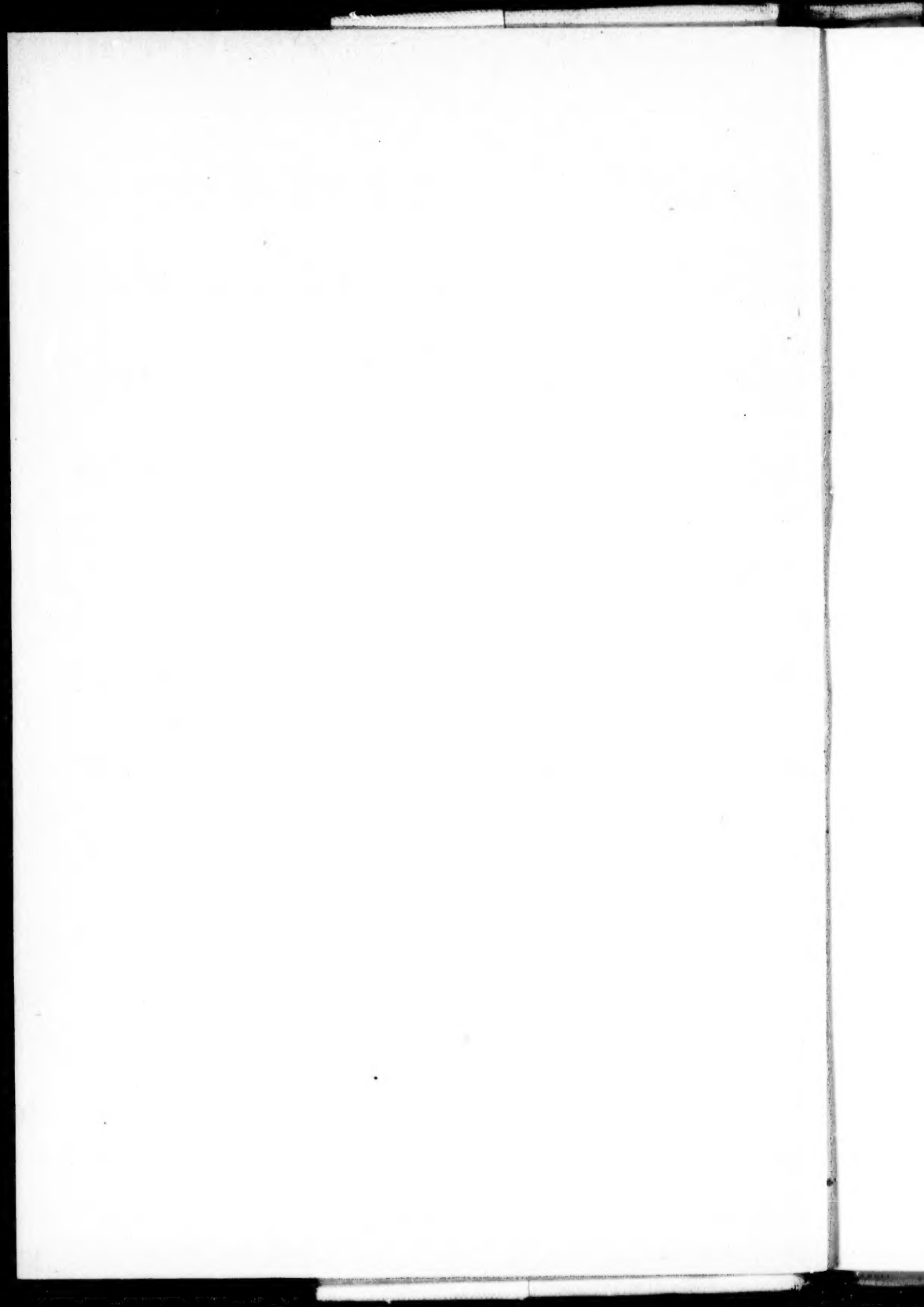
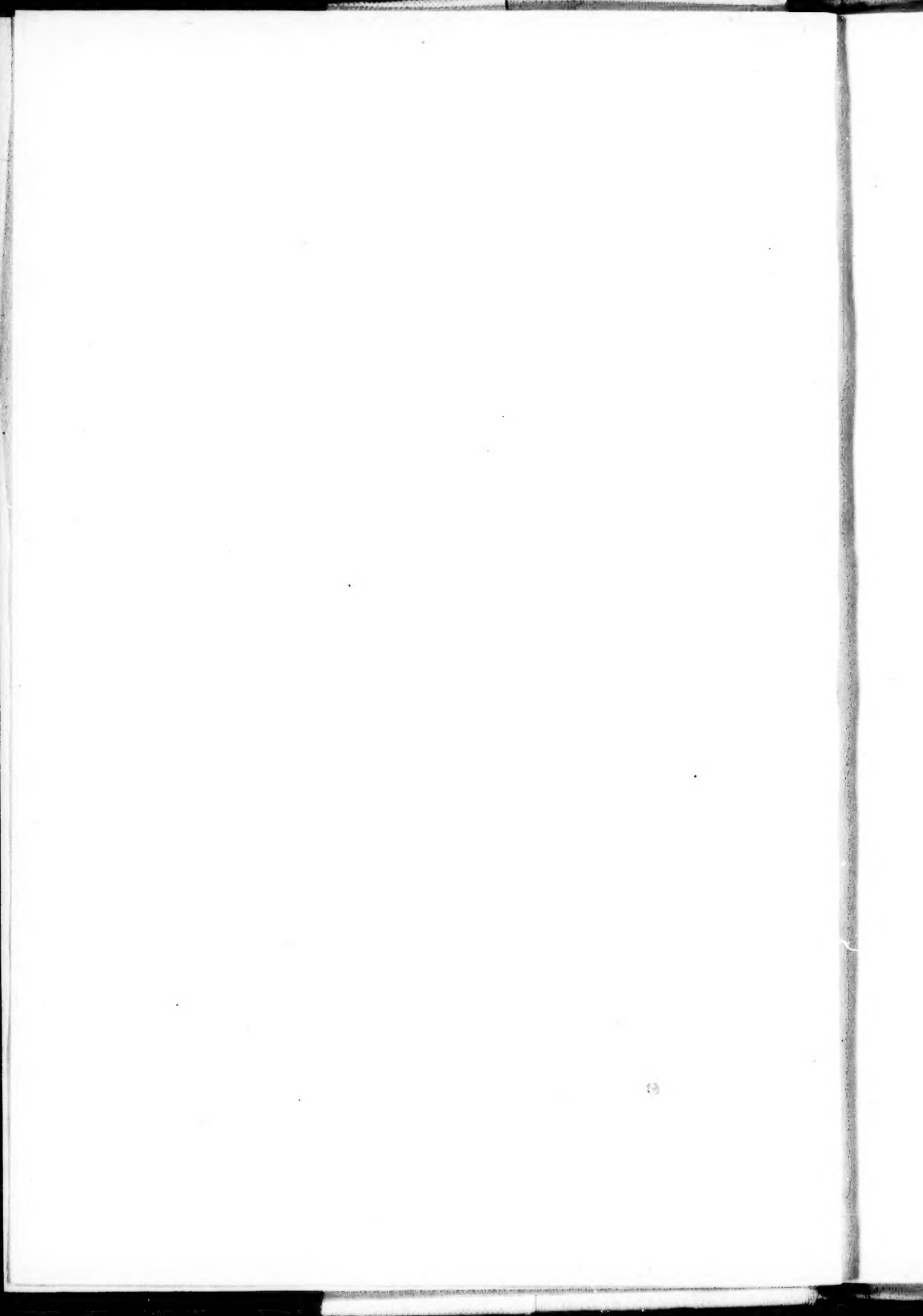




SORROW



Sorrow
and
Old Friends

By
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Philadelphia
Henry Altemus Company

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SORROW.

IT was summer. The hot sun glazed the white road golden-yellow. The shadows thrown across it reflected blue from the cloudless sky. Across the little picket fence the purple and white lilacs drowsily kissed the lazy air with their perfumed breath; slow-winged bees droned sleepily and sucked leisurely at the lilac nectar. It was summer. The birds sang it, the trees whispered it.

A blind man, led by a little boy, came waveringly up the road. Opposite the lilacs

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he stopped, raised his head and took a great deep draught of the perfumed air. It filled his lungs and spread his chest, as the wide-spread nostrils drank it in. The birds, startled by his appearance, twittered and chided him for intruding.

He put the heel of a time-browned violin under his chin and drew the bow tremulously across the eager strings. The wailing notes jostled their way over the lilacs, elbowing the droning of the bees and the silly twitter of the birds, and glided through an open window.

Dot heard it; and a little battered doll tumbled recklessly to the floor as she

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jumped up clapping her tiny hands with delight.

"Moosic, Mudder!" she said. The doll looked up, filled with pathetic resentment, but Dot didn't mind; dolls were all very well for a general engagement, but music was the soul of things; it cut out the whole world with Dot.

"I don't want to play in your yard," sang the violin; and the birds stared stupidly at this strange-voiced creature that hushed their timid lay with its strident song.

"Here's a penny," said Dot's mother, "give it to the man."

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The little girl danced down the gravel path and pushed her way through the lilacs out onto the walk. Then she stopped suddenly—shyly—she had seen the little boy.

The music had called to her—it was a friend, even the birds were not afraid of it—but a boy, that was something for serious consideration.

Dot stood irresolutely turning the penny over and over with timid nervousness. Resolve darted her forward, and almost before she knew it she had dropped the coin in the little brown paw of the lad.

That was the beginning. She backed

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up two steps and sighed contentedly. The music whispered reassuringly; so she listened with the birds and the lilacs and the drowsy-eared trees and looked into the big brown Italian eyes of the boy, and saw that he was only a little boy.

The next time the fiddler came she spoke to him. The pair came often after that.

The blind fiddler, the brown-eyed boy, a golden-haired little girl, a penny and the music. Rather a simple group.

The player's face had always been plain. When God had closed the windows of his soul and shut out the light, it

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had grown plainer, but that made no difference.

The little meetings came oftener, the birds sang blither, the sun shone gentler, the lilacs saved up their fragrance for the music days, and the bees droned happier when Dot and her friends met.

Then many days went by and the fiddler did not come. Dot waited and counted the days and asked her mother why; and something had gone out of the summer.

There were three weeks like this and then one day the violin sent a sigh up the gravel walk and Dot heard it. She skip-

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ped eagerly out to the old music trysting place. The man was alone.

"Where's 'oor little boy?" she asked.

"He's dead," the blind man answered, and the bow pulled heavily at the discordant strings.

"Won't he tum any more?" Dot asked, trying to understand the great something that was not of the music, nor of dolls, nor of anything she knew.

The man stopped playing, searched about in the dead air with his wavering fingers until he found the curly head, and as his hand rested there for an instant, answered, "No, Pietro won't come any more."

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That was all; but some of the knowledge of the emptiness of the world came to Dot. The leaves whispered it and the lilacs breathed it, and she went into the house, and, taking the little battered doll in her arms, cried, and cried, and by-and-by fell asleep on the floor.

After many days the player came again, and stopped at the lilacs in front of Number 7. The violin called, and whispered, and sang, and stopped, and called again, but Dot did not come. A man walking briskly by, stopped, looked at the house, and touched the player on the arm.

"Don't you see there is crape on the

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door—white crape!" he said reproachfully. "Pardon me," he added hastily, as the player turned his face, and he saw that he was blind. "I did not know—forgive me."

The blind man moved vacantly a few steps, and sat down brokenly on the edge of the walk. He sat there a long time, the plain, shaggy head drooped hopelessly on his breast.

"God takes all the flowers," he muttered; "all the sweet young flowers, and leaves a ragged weed like me. Oh, Pietro, Pietro! why can't I go too. I am blind and tired—"

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"Come, move on," a rough voice said, and a policeman shook him by the shoulder. He got up, moved aimlessly a little distance, and when the heavy steps of the officer died out he went back and sat down again, and waited.

He was listening for something—watching with his ears. "Perhaps they'll come to-day," he muttered, and waited.

At last there was the sound of wheels—
—heavy, muffled wheels. He knew what that meant. He counted—one, two—a dozen; always the same slow solemn roll of heavy wheels, and always hushed at the same place; just where he used to

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play; where Pietro and the little girl used to chatter; where the silly birds mocked him, and the leaves whispered, and the lilacs shed their perfume.

He rose up, and going close to the gate, stood with bared head. Somebody passing dropped a coin in the hat. He threw it far out into the dusty road.

He could hear the people going in and coming out.

At last there was the shuffling sound of many feet moving together—something was being carried.

The blind man stepped forward and raised his hand. The bearers stopped.

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The blind man felt his way reverently until his hand touched something hard and polished and cold.

The plain face drooped lower and lower, the heavy lips rested for an instant softly, gently, on the casket. Then the stooped figure straightened up—turned—passed through the gate and slowly up the walk, feeling its poor blind way with the stick.

The carriages rolled away—the lilac bushes were bare—the birds had ceased to sing—there was no sunlight—for it was autumn.

Even the great house was silent.

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WHEN God closed out the lives of little Peter Neuman's parents, and they both lay silent and at rest in the square, white, picket-fenced burying ground in the east end of Petrolea, it really looked as though no lieutenant had been left to look after the boy.

To Pete, schooling, and training, and culture, were vague, unmeaning terms. They were as strange as the names of extinct animals. Food was the most engrossing, terrible word in the whole vocabulary of life.

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That was what he had been born for, to struggle for food. It was a bitter struggle, too, and the boy was capable of so much—the “so much” might be for good or for evil.

Just as the young life was travelling evil-ward, the pastor of the Baptist Church stretched out his hand and his heart and drew the waif a little to one side.

It needed so little, too, at first; and then afterward, with watchfulness, Peter never looked longingly over the hedge at the road he had been drawn away from.

In those days four churches stood side

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by side in the low flat which separated the eastern half of the town from the western; plain, frame buildings, all of them—small and unpretentious.

They were raised ten feet from the ground, and the sidewalk and road ran across the whole stretch of the flat at the same level. The spring floods made this necessary.

Little Pete grew strong physically because of the work among the oil wells; and his health, morally, was superb because of the little pine-boarded church, and the stoop-shouldered pastor who ever kept his eye on the orphan boy.

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When Pete was out of work the minister, Mr. Grant, saw that he got employment again. When his fresh young spirits were groping about in the dark for food for the mind, Grant saw that the food was healthy.

It was a simple, uneventful country-life episode. "I am the keeper of my brother's child," the minister said by his acts; and no doubt God approved of the principle, though the Petrolea people were far too busy with the constantly recurring big strikes of oil to pay much attention to the matter. It was probably the min-

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ister's business anyway—he was always at that sort of thing.

Then one day Peter went away. There were no celestial phenomena manifested over his departure. He simply went out in the world to look for the fortune that is due every boy.

Peter had two regrets in leaving; he would miss the minister, and a knowledge that a debt hung over the little church bore heavy on his mind. He made a silent vow that he would wipe it out when he got rich.

Some years after Minister Grant received a letter from a man containing a

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draft large enough to wipe out the full indebtedness of the church, and place it on a good worldly footing.

The only condition attached was that they should never part with the old building. That was made imperative.

Also the sender would feel much obliged if the minister would keep the source from which the money had come quite a secret.

The condition and the wish were easily complied with—they had no desire to part with the church, and as the sender of the draft was a stranger to Grant (for it did not bear Peter's name) it saved him a

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world of trouble, so to speak, to keep it dark.

The minister simply said that somebody had sent him money to pay the debt, and stated the conditions.

The congregation formed a judgment division at once; one half were positive that it was Mr. Langton, a rich oil man, who had furnished the money; the other half declared it was Bredin, the nitroglycerine man. He was making a fortune shooting wells, but, as it was rather a precarious business, his predecessor having been blown up the fourth month of his labors, it was almost certain that he

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was investing this money as a sort of religious insurance business.

Two or three thought that it might be that "Drinking Tom" Burns had put the money in, for "a gusher" had been struck on his farm, and he was constantly on the lookout for novel methods of getting rid of his cash.

The minister paid up the debt and said never a word.

The oil field grew and broadened out, and wealth came to the workers therein.

The population of the town multiplied, and of course the congregations absorbed their quota of the people.

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Drillers and small oil men lived in the houses that had formerly been the palatial residences of wealthy operators. These latter had built larger structures of brick and stone, and their earlier homes looked mean and wooden by comparison.

The little frame churches in the hollow became hot, and stifling, and crowded with the large congregations that grew greater year by year.

First the Church of England built a fine brick temple, almost like a cathedral, up in the west end of the town. Why, the rectory was almost as fine as the old church in the flat. Then the Presbyter-

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ians deserted the old ground, and built a church of equal dimensions.

And so, one after another, until even the little Baptist chapel that Minister Grant loved so well, and from which Peter had cleared the debt, became silent and like an organ from which the music had gone.

And all the time hardly a Sabbath passed with Peter in his adopted land but that he thought of his boyhood friends as worshipping in their old places in the little church.

He lived in a great city, and attended service in a magnificent building, but his

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eyes saw it not. He saw only the stooped form of Minister Grant, the man who had made his life worth the living.

That was the picture always in his mind. Just as he had seen them as a boy in the little church, so they lingered with him in memory.

The town grew, and the changes went on, even the moving of the congregation into the big new church; and Peter's fortune grew and enlarged until he became wealthy, and his years filled into his life till he became grey, and still the picture remained ever the same. There was no change in that.

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At last, when he was getting a little weary of his life's work, the longing to see the friends of his boyish church days, as they were then, came upon him so strong that he journeyed back to his cradle-town.

It was evening, and as the train swung in, past the great blazing fires of the oil refineries, the smell of spent acid and petroleum gas smote upon his nostrils like the perfume of childhood's clover-fields.

The tears were close at the back of his eyes. Was he not born among all this? Had his father not toiled at the great red fires, and his mother breathed the same

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strong smelling air? Was it not his birth-place—his native land; and the creaking machinery of the pumping rigs, and the myriad three-poled derricks dotting the landscape like skeleton pyramids, the signs made manifest of his nativity?

He was coming home.

How he wondered if he should find any of the old friends in the little church. *It* would still be there, for his money had ensured that. Like a friend it would confront him and bless him for its salvation.

God had prospered him in a foreign land, but it was good to come home to the place of his humble child-life.

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The hotel was new; it was not the old, bulging board building that had stood on the corner when he lived there before. The electric lights, and the glass doors, and the modern glitter of the place chilled him.

All the faces were new. In the crowd that thronged through the offices and halls he felt like a man who struggles wearily across a great plain alone.

When he had eaten he started eagerly for the one place he felt sure was unchanged.

Straight eastward through the main

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street he walked—not a building could he recognize.

Plate glass and bricks confronted him where before had been the cosy little windows of the stores he knew so well.

There on the right old man Bishop had sold him overalls; a little higher up he had bought good stout boots from King. The stores were new and the keepers strangers to him.

He almost ran in his eagerness to get by it all. It made him feel so much alone in the world.

At the top of the hill he could see the road winding like a grey woollen thread

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across the flat; a row of lamps glinted like a string of star-beads by the side of it. On the right, half way over, he could see the firm outline of a square, sharp-roofed building, a spire cut the gloom of the night sky.

From the gothic windows the bright lights streamed. His heart gave a great throb of joy. He sat on the handrail that guarded the high sidewalk, and tried to compose himself. He was trembling with joyous, eager excitement.

Ah! this was home. There were lights in the windows for him; the church was

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his mother; it had sheltered him when he was an outcast.

And now after all those years he had come back to the home of his childhood, and where all else was cold and chill, the church was still there, and warm and bright, and beckoning to him with its lights.

Then he walked on again. As he approached the church, he heard the shuffling of many feet.

"It's prayer meeting, I suppose," he thought, "and the people must be coming out." But the door did not open.

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As he approached, the noise grew louder. Still nobody appeared.

"I wonder if I shall find the old minister here still," he muttered as he opened the door.

On the threshold he stood like a man petrified.

A dozen young men were rushing and tearing at each other like gladiators in a Roman arena. High up on the wall, just where the blue and gold pipes of the organ had once stood, was a queer arrangement like a fish net.

They were playing basket ball.

The chill that had crept about his heart

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up in the fantastically decorated hotel again gripped him. Familiar sights that he had expected were all absent.

Just over in the corner to the left was where Deacon Ball used to kneel in prayer.

He remembered with a little pang of remorse how he had often smiled in derision at the enormous feet of the Deacon, as they stuck out in the aisle; there never was room in the pew for both them and the Deacon.

Now the umpire of the game sat there with a little bell in his hand which he tinkled occasionally.

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Nobody paid the slightest attention to Peter. He closed the door and trudged back wearily through the hot spring night to the hotel.

In the warm bright sunshine of the next morning a little of the cold thawed from Peter's heart. Minister Grant was still alive, he discovered. His benefactor had given up the care of the flock, and was living in silver-haired peace where he had labored his good life through.

Peter's voice trembled a little when he spoke of the little old church—told that it was he who had sent the funds.

"Ah! said the minister, "your gift of

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money was nothing to the foresight which commanded us to keep the old church forever. It does more good to-day, perhaps, than the new building in which our people worship.

"In it our young men find amusement and manly games which keep them from the billiard and bar rooms of the hotels.

"There seems to be a charm about the old place, for they will go there when you couldn't get them to attend a prayer meeting."

A great peace stole over the heart of Peter.

God had blessed his gift.